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Fundamentals of Screenwriting: The First Step

Wan Aida Wan Yahaya

Screenwriting returns to its roots in an attempt to inspire young writers to write and tell their story. It is believed that good writing begins with the ability to present a story clearly, with narrative momentum and the ability to produce an emotional impact. Therefore, a few suggestions have been made to assist writers in the act of writing for the screen. However, the ability to write also depends on the writers' ability to overcome various obstacles, thus, producing a story worthy of itself.

Introduction

If ever there was a hard thing to do, it would be exactly this. Putting what is thought and felt into an expressive form, presented in writing, on paper. Where do you begin? How do you start? This piece is not an attempt to tell you the how's but more as a stepping-stone in the needed direction because, writing is a process that occurs step by step.

The fundamentals of writing begin when hundreds and thousands of words go through the brain. Therefore, the ability to actually catch those words and put them to paper is an extremely challenging one. But after the words are selected they form sentences, and from sentences they form paragraphs, and from paragraphs they come together to form a story. Thus, it is all a matter of putting the words to paper that will determine the story you are going to tell.

Writing Qualities

It is believed that the two most important qualities of writing a story are based on the ability to present *humanity* and *warmth* (Zinsser, 1998). Now, how does one present humanity in a piece of writing? This term does not refer to any philosophies or ideologies, but it refers to your ability of relating to stories closest to you. Humanity is present in the retelling of stories familiar to us, stories that are part of our daily lives. Things that we do and feel are part of what makes us human, and therefore represents a part of our humanity. How we interact with others, how we react to a happy situation, a sad one, all that reflects our humanity, our presence. Warmth on the other hand is made visible when the stories that you have to tell are able to evoke reactions, feelings and response from its readers. It is present in fairy tales when all fairy tales end with *happily ever after*. Some may believe that feeling for a certain story is fictitious, but a good piece of writing is in the ability of the writer to effect his/her reader. Thus, any story that makes you laugh or cry is a story that is able to conjure warmth. But do not get me wrong. This does not mean that stories that are about abuse, anger, depreciation, poverty and sorts do not have a presence of warmth, but in this case they bring forward a different kind of reaction. Whereby the reaction is more on a judgment of values, morals and subjective to all individuals as to their beliefs. But the ability to make the reader feel and

connect with your story is an essential one.

Good writing occurs when the reader reads without wanting to put down the pages. Good writing enables the reader to feel, understand and connect with the story. Thus, good writing comes from the heart - through sincerity and honesty. So now how do you write with sincerity and honesty? According to Suppa (2003), a well told story is told based on clarity, narrative momentum and the emotional impact it brings forth, and with it the presence of sincerity and honesty.

Stories require "clarity" in being able to transfer all ideas affectively. Should an idea be vague in presentation, causing the reader to become confused, then the story cannot be considered clear. In order to ensure that a story has clarity, a writer must be able to explain, describe and visualize so that the reader can understand, comprehend and visualize at the same time. What the writer wants to say has to be captured easily by the reader at first read. If the reader is able to understand within one reading of the story then the writer has portrayed a clear and understandable scenario.

"Narrative momentum" refers to the ability of the story to carry the reader from beginning to end. This relates back to the ability of a story to capture the emotions of the reader. Narrative is the way a story unfolds. For example, a love story such as *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare would have the presence of a forbidden love, jealousy, rivalry, passion, devastation and loss. With a good narrative momentum, the reader would be thrown from one segment into another segment, feeling the turmoil, the heartache, the anger and the sadness that comes with the story. There is a rhythm that ensures that the story will be read (or later viewed), without the reader (or viewer), wanting to stop. Therefore, a good story with a carefully laid out narrative momentum would have the fundamentals of a beginning, middle and end, in order to bring the story full circle.

The "emotional impact" of a story is closely related to narrative momentum, whereby it is able to capture the reader's emotions and feelings by effecting them through a piece of writing. A good story is evident in its ability to ensure that the reader (or audience) is left with an impression. This impression may be of various levels, some stories like fairytales, have happy endings, some stories like *American Beauty* (1999) by Alan Ball, may leave the reader (or audience) with a bitter sweet feeling. Other stories like *Braveheart* (1995) by Mel Gibson managed to instill a sense of patriotism, while stories like *Forrest Gump* (1994) instilled emotions of well being, social acceptance and innocence. When a story is able to present an emotional impact, it would mean that the story was an effective one that will be remembered for a very long time. In relation to screenwriting, the producer of *Chinatown*, *Love Story*, and *The Godfather* to name a few, Robert Evans believes that, "the secret to a great story or film is that if the story or film can make you laugh and cry in the span of two hours than it is a hit" (Clinch, 2003).

Now, all the above - clarity, narrative momentum and emotional impact, added with a little imagination is able to create a formula that enables a good story to be told. And "imagination is borderless." Therefore, a writer can write about anything.

Where to Begin?

Some believe that writing is easy, while others believe is hard. So another question arises, where do we begin? In order to begin writing, as suggested by Grenville (1998), there are a few obstacles that a beginning writer needs to overcome, beginning with:

The voice in your head - The voice in the head is always saying, "Just begin at the beginning". However, that is easier said than done. Where is the beginning? What is the beginning? Looking and starting at the beginning is the hardest thing to do, and at the end of the day, the last thing you really do. Therefore, block out the screaming voices in your head and change it to the correct voice. The correct voice should be - Just start.

The next obstacle that a new writer would face, would be trying to figure out what you want to say - Some say planning is everything, "To fail to plan, is to plan to fail," but then sometimes you are still left sitting with a blank piece of paper. At other times you spend hours and days pondering questions such as, what are the exact words? What are the exact ideas? Unfortunately at the end of that long agonizing day you still have not found the right words or ideas. Therefore, the final decision is - Decide.

It is also suggested that a writer should know their characters - However, this advice may be jumping the gun a little as for most stories, characters become known, after they have been written. You need to write your characters beforehand and as you write on do you build, create and understand your characters. Once this phase is over, only will you characters have depth and presence within your story.

The perception that all writings have to be grammatically correct - True, being grammatically correct is important for unobtrusive reading and comprehension. But as a first step, you need to be able to concentrate on the ideas you want to present. As most writing drafts, nothing is ever correct once (or the first time), therefore, you need to focus and ensure that your ideas are conveyed clearly and are able to explain the points you want to put forth. Once your stories and ideas are in place, then grammar and spelling checks can be entertained. Perfecting a story is all about rewriting, rewriting and rewriting (Lucey, 1996).

Being able to present an interesting writing style - This obstacle is one belief that will take time to develop. Writing style is not instilled in a writer. Most writers develop a personal writing style after lots and lots of writing. For example, J.K. Rowlings, the famous author of the *Harry Potter* series and J.R.R. Tolkein and his *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy, did not become captivating writers overnight. Style is a technique that is developed over time and through lots of practice. If you do not start writing, how are you to practice? Therefore, going back to the first advice - Just start.

Finally, the obstacle of being able to come up with strong stories - It must be made known here that a strong story is built. It does not just come out of one writing. Like building blocks and like jigsaw, stories are built one piece at a time, bit by bit. A story may begin with a simple idea, but after careful thought, sufficient development of ideas, narrative and characters, corrective grammar, development of style the story will become a strong story. A good story evolves and changes as the story is told, and it unfolds to explore new paradigms and avenues. The more it evolves and grows the stronger the story becomes.

Based on all the above named obstacles, at the end of the day, the best advice Grenville suggests is - Do not listen to the voices. She believes that as a writer you need to break free from the conventional techniques of being organized and making sense. Writers have to end up making sense but they do not have to start off making sense (Grenville, 1998). She believes that a certain amount of disorder is good during the early stages of writing. Why is this order good? This is

because when you first start a piece of writing it is better to ensure that you have all your ideas penned down. It is better to have more material than you need and more ideas, than none. As a writer, you need to have an unlimited resource of ideas, characters, events, images and moods so that you can pick and choose, rather than having a poor selection.

However, all this takes practice because how good or bad a piece of writing [in the end] speaks for itself (Suppa, 2003).

Conclusion

Writing is about being honest in the portrayal of stories related to us. Should good writing be produced it should have the ability to make its readers feel - whether they laugh or cry. Thus, making clarity, narrative momentum and emotional impact important aspects to consider while writing. But writing is also about overcoming the voices in our heads - overcoming the uncertainties and the self-proclaimed rules.

So, it is important that as writers, we have to break the conventional rule that everything has to be right at first try. This is the biggest obstacle that you have to overcome, but as mentioned by Yoda of *Star Wars*, *overcome it you must*. As to become a good writer it takes practice and lots of practice in order to gain the confidence to become a great writer. As the father of screenwriting, Robert McKee (1999) believes - Anxious, inexperienced writers obey rules. Rebellious, unschooled writers break rules. Artists master the form. With that, to all would be writers - good luck.

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